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Research on Confucius' Thoughts on Sports

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Abstract

Confucianism is the core of traditional Chinese culture. The Confucian school represented by Confucius has profoundly influenced the political process and cultural trend of ancient Chinese society. Scholars mostly study Confucius' thoughts on benevolence, rites and music, but rarely study his thoughts on sports. In fact, Confucius's sports thoughts are also very rich, including promote "shooting, guarding" and the concept of education for all-round development, "respect for rites" and sports ethics, "achieving longevity" and ways to maintain health, and the practical insights of "fitness and leisure". Confucius's sports thoughts had a great influence on the sports thoughts of later generations in China.

Keywords: Confucius, sports thought, rituals and music, benevolence and righteousness

1. Introduction

Confucius (552-479 BCE), as the most renowned educator in Chinese history, proposed educational ideas such as "teaching without discrimination" 有教无类 and "teaching students according to their aptitude" 因材施教, which still have important guiding significance for contemporary physical education practices. Confucius's thoughts on physical education reflected his political pursuits and were closely linked to the social background of his time. During the Spring and Autumn Period when Confucius lived, the Zhou royal family was gradually declining and losing control over the land. Various feudal states, in order to contend for power and supremacy, frequently launched wars against each

other. As mentioned in *Zuo Zhuan*, "The great affairs of a state are sacrifices and war." (国之大事，在祀与戎)¹. For these feudal states, wars, like sacrifices, were considered the top priorities of the state. Therefore, although Confucius's educational objective was not to train warriors, the needs of war also required students to be proficient in military skills. Confucius also highly valued the importance of physical activities for a person's overall development and was dedicated to cultivating talents who were

¹ Hong Liangji 洪亮吉, *Chunqiu Zuo Zhuan* 春秋左传诂, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1987, p.467.

proficient in both cultural and military skills. Furthermore, with the decline of the Zhou royal family's power, the rites of Zhou were also severely damaged. Confucius dedicated his life to restoring the ritual and musical system of the Western Zhou Dynasty. To restore this system, it was necessary to integrate various aspects into the ideological space of the rites of Zhou, which elevated physical activities from superficial bodily movements to a realm of cultural thought and allowed them to develop and grow within the cultural system of Confucianism.

2. Research Review

Before we discuss Confucius' thoughts on sports, we first do a research review.

Many researchers have conducted detailed discussions on the sports thoughts of Confucius. Confucius has always been a focal point of pre-Qin studies, and his sports thoughts have also received significant attention. In Cao Dong's article "Confucius's Sports Thoughts and Their Influence on Later Generations", the characteristics of Confucius's sports thoughts are summarized as emphasizing practicality and centering on "benevolence". At the same time, these two characteristics are interconnected, with the basic content of Confucius's sports thoughts being "rites" as the outer shell and "benevolence" as the inner core.² In Gui Yongfeng's article "An Analysis of Confucius's Sports Thoughts", he also focuses on "benevolence", believing it to be the core of Confucius's sports thoughts. Based on this, he proposes that the focus of Confucius's sports thoughts is "longevity", which reflects the emphasis on the individual attributes of sports and later develops into the Confucian thought of "health preservation".³ Huang Lisheng's "A Study of Confucius's Sports Education Thoughts and Teaching Practice Activities" systematically summarizes Confucius's sports teaching thoughts. He points out that Confucius's sports thoughts embody the requirement for comprehensive human development. By teaching students' military knowledge and skills such as "archery" and "charioteering", he enhances their physical fitness, allowing students to promote physical and mental health through sports exercises while seeking knowledge and cultivating morality.⁴

Through the analysis of the above articles, we can see that Confucius has begun to emphasize the importance of sports for the comprehensive development of human beings.

3. Confucius' Thoughts on Sports

Research on Confucian sports thoughts has achieved many results, but it lacks systematic summarization and elaboration. This paper attempts to comprehensively understand Confucius's thoughts on sport and believed it will make new contributions to the study of Confucius' sports thoughts.

3.1. Emphasis on "Archery and Charioteering"射御 and the Concept of Comprehensive Education

² Cao Dong, "Influences of Confucius' sport ideology on the later ages", *Journal of Wuhan Institute of Physical Education*, 2023(5), pp 43-44.

³ Gui Yongfeng, "Analysis of Confucius' thoughts on sports", *Science and Education Wenhui (First Month)*, Issue 31, 2011, pp. 145-147.

⁴ Huang Lisheng, "Study on Confucius' thought of physical education and practical teaching activity", *China Sports Science and Technology*, Issue 6, 2006.

In Confucius's educational philosophy, the goal of cultivating a "gentleman"⁵ was his pursuit in talent cultivation. Confucius's understanding of talent can be glimpsed through a dialogue between him and Zilu子路 in *The Analects*. In the Book XIV of *The Analects*, it is recorded:

Zilu asked about the complete man. The Master said, "A man as wise as Tsang Wu-chung臧武仲, as free from desires as Meng Kung-ch'uo公綽, as courageous as Chuang-tzu of Pien卞莊子 and as accomplished as Jan Ch'iu冉求, who is further refined by the rites and music, may be considered a complete man. 若臧武仲之知, 公綽之不欲, 卞莊子之勇, 冉求之艺, 文之以礼乐, 亦可以为人矣"⁶

The "complete man" mentioned in the dialogue with Zilu refers to a perfect person. In the dialogue, the person mentioned by Confucius, Chuang-tzu of Pien, was a brave warrior in the state of Lu during the Spring and Autumn period, powerful and physically strong, and reputed to have killed two tigers with his bare hands. In Confucius's view, to become a "complete man", it was not enough to possess great wisdom, versatility, and virtuous frugality; physical strength and bravery were also indispensable. In addition, Confucius also said, "There are three things constantly lips of the gentleman none of which I have succeeded in following: A man of benevolence never worries, a man of wisdom is never in two minds, a man of courage is never afraid. 君子道者三, 我无能焉: 仁者不忧, 知者不惑, 勇者不惧"⁷ The "virtue" mentioned here refers to moral requirements, "wisdom" refers to cultural and knowledge requirements, and "courage" emphasizes physical and sports requirements. Confucius not only valued the study of knowledge and the cultivation of morality but also paid attention to people's physical health. What Confucius called a "complete man", according to today's concept, refers to a comprehensive talent with the overall development of morality, intelligence, and physical fitness.

Confucius used the standard of being a "complete man", as an important criterion for talent cultivation and trained many virtuous and talented individuals who were proficient in both cultural and military skills. In specific educational practices, the most representative method was the implementation of the "six arts"六艺 educational strategy. The "six arts" refer to "rites, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and arithmetic". Among them, "rites" are requirements in terms of moral education, "writing" and "arithmetic" are requirements in terms of intellectual education, and "archery" and "charioteering" refer to physical education. "Archery" and "charioteering" involve shooting arrows and driving war chariots. During the Spring and Autumn Period, the development of sports was still in its infancy, and the development of sports culture was closely related to labor and military affairs at that time. "Archery" and "charioteering" were specific manifestations of the combination of early sports and military skills.

⁵ The English translation of *The Analects of Confucius* in this article is all based on *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, the Chinese University Press, Hong Kong, 1992 2nd edition.

⁶ *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, p.135.

⁷ *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, p.141.

Two of the six arts are related to physical education, which fully reflects Confucius's emphasis on physical exercise. This is closely related to the social reality of the warring states at that time. Confucius once said, "To send the common people to war untrained is to throw them away. 以不教民战，是谓弃之"⁸ This means that if you do not teach people the skills of warfare and then order them to participate in war, not only will their individual lives be difficult to guarantee, but the country will also perish. Although Confucius advocated "benevolent governance", he supported and affirmed just wars to overthrow tyrannical rulers. Moreover, in the social context of that time, only by being rich, powerful, and having a strong military could a country's security be guaranteed, and its people could live and work in peace and contentment. Therefore, Confucius placed great importance on the cultivation of people's physical abilities and on teaching students military sports skills such as archery and charioteering, not only to enhance their physical strength but also for the practical need of defending their homeland.

3.2 Respect for Ritual and Sports Ethics

The concept of "ritual" is central to Confucius's thought and an important aspect of Confucianism. Originally referring to the rites used in sacrificial activities, "ritual" later expanded to encompass general norms and standards of behavior. Ritual can be used to regulate all human actions, providing specific and operable guidelines for behavior in particular situations. In Confucius's view, "ritual" is the standard by which people must conduct themselves and the foundation for one's standing in society. *The Analects of Confucius* also emphasizes this point multiple times, such as in "Unless you study the rites you will be ill-equipped to talk you stand. 不学礼，无以立"⁹ In Confucius's perspective, all human actions are constrained by "ritual", and sports activities are no exception.

While Confucius valued bravery in sports, he considered moral character to be paramount. "In having courage he will become unruly",¹⁰ and "For the gentlemen it is morality that is considered supreme. Possessed of courage but devoid of morality, a gentleman will make trouble while a small man will be a brigand. 君子有勇而无义为乱，小人有勇而无义为盗。"¹¹ Thus, the bravery advocated by Confucius is restrained by "ritual" and is not recklessness but should be combined with wisdom and strategy.

Confucius said, "I set my heart on the Way, base myself on virtue, lean upon benevolence for support and take my recreation in the arts. 志于道，据于德，依于仁，游于艺"¹² This means that the primary focus for a noble person is to aspire to the Way, base themselves on virtue, rely on benevolence, and cultivate their overall qualities through the six arts. Among the "six arts", "ritual" is not only one of them but is also ranked first, and activities such as "archery" and "charioteering" are both restrained and limited by ritual. In the *Book of Rites (Liji)*, it is recorded that when Confucius watched a local archery competition, he said: "In the shooting ceremony, music is used to accompany the shooting. What music is the shooter listening to? Consider how to match your shooting movements with the rhythm of the movement. 射之以乐也，何以

听？何以射"¹³ And he said, "Launch according to the rhythm of the music, and every time you launch, you can stay within the target. Probably only a virtuous person can do that! 循身而发，发而不失正鹄者，其唯贤者乎"¹⁴ Here, Confucius links the outcome of sports activities with people's moral cultivation, and "virtuous person" refers to someone with high moral cultivation. In Confucius's view, whether one can hit the target is determined by the level of their moral cultivation. Similarly, in sports activities, one should also pay attention to their own behavior. Confucius once said, "There is no contention between gentlemen. The nearest to it is, perhaps, archery. In archery they bow and make way for one another as they go up and on coming down they drink together. Even the way they contended is gentlemanly. 君子无所争，必也射乎！揖让而升，下而饮，其争也君子"¹⁵ This means that true noble people do not contend, but if they must compete, they do so through archery to determine victory or defeat. Both parties should perform a courteous bow before the competition, fully embodying the noble person's humility and politeness. After the competition, regardless of the outcome, they drink together. It can be seen that while Confucius acknowledges the reasonableness of contention among noble people, "They bow and make way for one another as they go up and on coming down they drink together" embodies the priority of ritual and does not emphasize the success or failure of the competition. Clearly, the purpose of archery is not just to compete but to display noble character through the competition.

3.3. Maintain "Achieving Longevity" and the Art of Health Preservation

The Analects of Confucius mentions Confucius's views and insights on health preservation multiple times. Confucius said, "The wise are joyful; the benevolent are long-lived. 知者乐，仁者寿"¹⁶ This passage fully reflects Confucius's view on health preservation. He believed that nourishing the body and mind with benevolence and virtue is an important factor in achieving longevity. Confucius's understanding of health preservation is not solely from the perspective of physical health but tightly combines the benevolence of Confucianism, believing that the fundamental aspect of health preservation is people's benevolent character. People with benevolent character can better cultivate their morality, thereby achieving better health preservation through moral cultivation. Therefore, Confucius often spoke of "the man of benevolence never worries 仁者不忧"¹⁷ and "the benevolent are long-lived. He believed that people with noble character can appropriately deal with all things in the world, correctly understand themselves, behave with integrity, and help maintain a stable mental and physical state, better achieving moral and physical cultivation. Conversely, if a person's character is low and they pursue unrealistic fame and wealth, it will greatly loss their mental and physical health, making it difficult to achieve longevity.

However, Confucius did not advocate that people should not have pursuits. On the contrary, he advocated pursuing with benevolence and virtue as the premise and viewing fame and wealth with the correct attitude and healthy approach. He did not advocate

⁸ *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, p.131.

⁹ *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, p.167.

¹⁰ *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, p.69.

¹¹ *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, p.181.

¹² *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, p.57.

¹³ Wang Wenjin 王文锦 *Liji Yijie 礼记译解* (Translation and Simple Explanation of *Liji*). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2001, p.341.

¹⁴ Wang Wenjin, *Liji Yijie*, p.938.

¹⁵ *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, p.21.

¹⁶ *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, p.53.

¹⁷ *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, p.85.

avoiding the world passively but advocated facing the difficulties and hardships in life with a positive and optimistic attitude, maintaining a peaceful state of mind and body in any situation, as he said, “Wealth and high station are what men desire, but unless I got them in the right way I would not abide in them. 富与贵, 是人之所欲也。不以其道得之, 不处也” Therefore, Confucius advocated “got them (wealth and high station) in the right way.”¹⁸

Once, Confucius asked several students to talk about their respective aspirations. Zilu said his aspiration was to govern a large state with a thousand chariots, while Ranqiu wanted to manage a small state. Gongxihua wanted to be the master of ceremonies in a temple. However, Zengdian said he wanted to “go bathing in the River Yi and enjoy the breeze on the Rain Altar, and then to go home chanting poetry 浴乎沂, 风乎舞雩, 咏而归” in the late spring.¹⁹ This means bathing in the River Yi and drying in the sun on the sacrificial altar. Among these students’ aspirations, Confucius agreed more with the scene described by Zengdian. Obviously, Zengdian’s words showed his indifference to fame and wealth, which resonated with Confucius. These all reflect the importance of benevolence and virtue in people’s moral and physical cultivation in Confucius’s view.

Apart from his insights into health preservation, Confucius also paid great attention to strengthening self-cultivation. “There are three things the gentleman should guard against. In youth when the blood and ch’I are still unsettled he should guard against the attraction of feminine beauty. In the prime of life when the blood and ch’I have become unyielding, he should guard against bellicosity. In old age when the blood and ch’I have declined, he should guard against acquisitiveness. 君子有三戒, 少之时, 血气未定, 戒之在色; 及其壮也, 血气方刚, 戒之在斗; 及其老也, 血气既衰, 戒之在得”²⁰ Confucius believed that in youth, people are prone to lust; in adulthood, they are prone to quarrelsomeness; and in old age, they become covetous. If not restrained, these can loss one’s mental and physical health, leading to illness.

Furthermore, Confucius opposed activities prevalent in society that are harmful to mental and physical health. The chapter of “WuyiJie 五仪解” of *Kongzi Jiayu* 孔子家语 recorded that when Duke Ai of State Lu asked Confucius why he did not participate in gaming 博戏 (a popular gambling activity in the Spring and Autumn period), Confucius considered gaming an “evil way” and believed that noble people would not participate in such activities and would not have any interest in them. This also reflects that Confucius’s understanding of health preservation is systematic. He provided key points to note for each period based on the physical and mental characteristics of people at different stages and showed that behavior can affect people’s mental and physical health.

3.4 Propose Practical Insights into “Fitness and Leisure”

Confucius is the first thinker and educator in Chinese educational history who regarded physical exercise as an important part of education and practiced it himself. The chapter “Zhushuxun” of *Huainanzi* 淮南子·主术训 recorded, “Confucius’s talents surpassed Chang Hong 苌宏 in wisdom, were comparable to Meng Ben 孟贲 in bravery, could move as fast as rabbits, and had the strength to

lift the crossbar of a city gate. His talents and abilities were numerous.”²¹ This passage indicates that Confucius was brave and vigorous, able to surpass warriors like Meng Ben, had a sturdy physique that allowed him to tread on fast-running rabbits, and was strong enough to lift the crossbar of a city gate. It can be seen that Confucius was not the “weak and frail scholar” commonly perceived but a “wise and capable” person.

Although Confucius was proficient in both literature and martial arts, the Chapter “Sheyi” of *Book of Rites* 礼记·射义 records that when Confucius was practicing archery in the wild, people heard of it and rushed to watch, resulting in a scene where “The crowd of spectators were like a wall.”²² As mentioned earlier, among the six arts, Confucius also excelled in archery and chariotry, and had his unique insights. Apart from the etiquette of archery, such as “go up and on coming down they drink together” 揖让而升, 下而饮. Confucius also had his own views on archery. He believed, “In archery the point lies not in piercing the hide. For the reason that strength varies from man to man. This was the way of antiquity. 射不主皮, 为力不同科, 古之道也”²³ At that time, archery targets were often made of animal skins. Warriors often pierced the targets due to their strong strength, but Confucius believed that whether one could pierce the target was determined by one’s strength and there was no need to excessively pursue piercing the target. Confucius once said to his disciples, “What should I make my speciality? Driving? Or archery? I think I should prefer driving. 吾何执? 执御乎? 执射乎? 吾执御矣”²⁴ This means that Confucius used the form of self-questioning and self-answering to express his strengths.

After Confucius was over fifty years old, he traveled around various states, and his strong physique was an important foundation. Therefore, in *The Analects of Confucius*, it is mentioned several times that Confucius’s steps “became brisk 足履如也” and “he went forward with quickened steps as though he was gliding on wings. 趋进, 翼如也”²⁵ These all demonstrate Confucius’s light footsteps and agile movements. Due to his experience of traveling around various states, it also had a great impact on his body and mind. He said, “The wise find joy in water; the benevolent find joy in mountains 知者乐水, 仁者乐山.”²⁶ This means that the pleasure of the wise is dynamic, like water, while the pleasure of the virtuous is static, like mountains, which fully reflects the influence of wisdom and benevolence on people’s body and mind in Confucius’s educational concept.

When Confucius looked at mountains and water, he would always ponder over life and nature. When climbing mountains and seeing the lush vegetation and the multiplication of all things, he would associate it with the virtue of a gentleman benefiting the people and the world, hence the saying “the benevolent find joy in mountains.” When looking at the rivers flowing ceaselessly, he would associate it with the irreversible passage of time and life, and exclaim, “What passes away is, perhaps, like this 逝者如斯夫

²¹ He Ning 何宁, *Huainanzi Jishi* 淮南子集释, Zhonghua Book Company, 1998, p.695.

²² Wang Wenjin, *Liji Yijie*, p. 934.

²³ *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, p.23.

²⁴ *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, p.77.

²⁵ *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, p.87.

²⁶ *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, p.53.

¹⁸ *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, p.29.

¹⁹ *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, p.105.

²⁰ *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, p.165.

.”²⁷ Confucius’s own experience of traveling around various states and his experience of observing mountains and water with his students not only made his educational views more comprehensive and three-dimensional but also practically enhanced his own physical and mental health. Apart from traveling through mountains and rivers, Confucius also enjoyed fishing and hunting, which were closely related to his proficiency in archery and chariotry. *The Analects of Confucius* records, Confucius “used to fishing line but not a cable; he used to corded arrow but not to shoot at roosting birds 子钓而不纲，弋不射宿.”²⁸ This means that Confucius did not catch small fish when fishing and did not shoot birds that had returned to their nests when hunting. This reflects Confucius’s benevolent view of nature. Even in popular fitness and entertainment activities such as fishing and hunting, Confucius always practiced benevolence.

4. Conclusion

Confucius lived to be seventy-three years old, which was already an extraordinary “rare age” and longevity under the social conditions of that time. More importantly, Confucius proposed many original insights on physical exercise, health preservation, and wellness, which were very rich in content and provided an ideological foundation for the development of later sports thought.

²⁷ *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, p.81.

²⁸ *The Analects*, translated by D.C.Lau, p.63.